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ABSTRACT

This study of the images of women as portrayed on new television programs in 1987-88 not only compared them with the images of the last season, but examined the similarities and differences between these characters and real life women. Each continuing female character on every new show was coded for race, age, occupation, marital and socioeconomic status, and number of children under 18 years of age. Analyses of these data showed a significant downturn in the number of female characters on television, with a return to male-dominated programs. However, there were some new programs with female characters, and those characters were portrayed in a more realistic fashion than in previous years. In addition, although young, white, single professional women continued to be the dominant profile, there were some working class female and nonprofessional characters in the new programs. While the number of minority female characters has grown, they exist primarily in black situation comedies, and minority females other than blacks were rare. Likewise, television's portrayal of families was beginning to acknowledge the pressures of combining work and family life. Nevertheless, most of the family life portrayed in the 1987-88 season concerned single fathers, with single mothers and nuclear families in the minority. (EW)

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WOMEN OUT OF VIEW

An Analysis of Female Characters on 1987-88 TV Programs

Written by Sally Steenland

Researched by Lauren Whittemore

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1325 G Street N.W. Lower Level
Washington, D.C. 20005
(202) 737-5764

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ABOUT THE COMMISSION:

The National Commission on Working Women of Wider Opportunities for Women works to improve the economic status of the 39 million women in non-professional occupations who constitute 77% of the female work force in the United States. Commission issues include fair wages, child care, education and training, and dignity in the workplace.

The Commission is led by a multi-sector advisory group composed of corporate and labor union leaders, congressional officials, educators, media representatives, women's advocacy leaders, and working women themselves. These sectors bring diverse experiences and various points of view to Commission deliberations, resulting in broad-based effective strategies.

Early in its history the Commission selected the media as an area of prime concern., Research has documented the importance of television in society: It is a powerful shaper of our attitudes, behavior and knowledge of the world. Research has also documented the treatment of women on television: Their portrayal tends to be stereotyped, narrow, and unrepresentative of the rich diversity of real women's lives. Because of the power of these accumulated images of women, the Commission has developed projects that increase the visibility and eradicate the stereotypes of women on television.

Beginning in 1979, Commission media projects have included the following activities:

* Sponsorship of the annual Women at Work Broadcast Awards competition which honors the nation's best television and radio programs about working women;

* Publication of annual critiques of the fall TV season analyzing the image of female characters on the new shows;

* Creation of a national symposium for TV and radio producers, directors, and advocacy groups to discuss the status of women in the broadcasting industry;

* Sponsorship of a 10-day museum exhibit of award-winning TV programs about working women and a concurrent seminar series;

* Publication of a "viewer scorecard" to increase audience awareness of television's portrayal of women;

* Publication of reports analyzing children and families on prime time television and of the image of older women on TV;

* Creation of media watch training workshops focusing on midlife and older women's portrayal in the media;
* Publication of an employment report analyzing the status of women producers, writers and directors on prime time TV.

"Women Out of View: An Analysis of Female Characters on 1987-88 TV Programs" is the most recent project in the Commission's nine year history of media work. The report will be distributed to national and grass roots women's organizations, educational institutions, and labor unions as part of a public education campaign encouraging viewers to respond to media portrayals in an organized way. The report will also be sent to the television networks and production studios and its findings discussed as part of an ongoing dialogue on women and television between the Commission and the TV industry.

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INTRODUCTION

This fall marks the sixth annual release of a National Commission on Working Women report analyzing the portrayal of women on the new TV season. As in years past, this report, comparing TV's image of women with those in the real world, stems from the acknowledgement that entertainment television is a powerful cultural force that demands serious attention. As one of the most effective message bearers in America, television is an important definer of societal norms, including those that shape female relationships and behavior.

As such, TV affects both males and females by presenting idealized portrayals of women within TV-created, narrowly drawn limits. Outside the TV norm, and therefore missing from the screen, are scores of original, authentic female images which correspond more closely to the wide range of women in the real world. With their absence, a distorted, yet compelling, view of women is presented night after night on the TV screen.

By analyzing these images, by marking the gap between TV's vision and reality, and by measuring changing trends from season to season, one is able to view more critically women's images on TV and to gather the data necessary to work for improved portrayals.

"Women Out of View" joins the Commission's earlier media reports and is its latest effort to analyze and interpret the image of women on premiering network programs.

This year's new fall line-up reveals several significant trends. After many seasons where the number of women on TV has either grown or remained steady, this season marks a sharp downturn. Male-dominated programs have returned to television this fall. Of 43 leading roles on new shows, 36 belong to men, while only seven belong to women. Almost 20% of new shows have no female characters at all. And in many other new programs, women play minor support roles and are irrelevant to the action. This turn to male-dominated programs halts Hollywood's slow but steady progress toward equitable portrayals of women on TV.

However, there are new programs on the air which contain women. And, in a bit of good news, many of these female portrayals are more realistically drawn than in years past. Although the dominant female profile on TV is still that of a young, white, and single woman who is professional, that profile is losing some dominance, as working class females and women in nonprofessional jobs are beginning to inch their way back on the screen after disappearing for almost a decade.

Likewise, TV's portrayal of families this season is beginning to acknowledge the pressures of combining work and family life, in contrast to past seasons, when juggling parent/worker/spouse roles was portrayed as quite effortless.

Balanced against this growing reality of family life is the demographic world of TV's children and their parents this season. It is a world in which single men are raising over half of all

children on the new programs. Single mothers are practically invisible, and nuclear families are also in the minority.

The following sections of "Women Out of View" explore these trends and others in more detail. In addition, the report measures historic progress by comparing current female portrayals with those of one and two decades ago. Finally, the report interprets this season's underlying messages and makes recommendations for change.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

On the 1987-88 television season, 26 new programs contain 53 recurring female characters with 36 leading roles for men and seven leading roles for women. Ten of the new shows air on ABC; ten on CBS, and six on NBC.

* GENDER: Of 26 new shows this season, 5 (19%) contain no continuing female characters at all. An additional 10 programs (38%) are essentially all-male shows with adult women either absent or in minor support roles. Combined, 57% of all new shows either portray no regular women characters or feature them in supporting roles. In reality, women comprise almost 52% of the entire population.

* AGE: Almost one-quarter (24%) of all female characters on new shows this season are children or teenagers. More than half (58%) are in their 20s and 30s, while only 15% are over age 40 and only 2% are over age 60. In reality, 33% of all women are in their 20s and 30s, 20% are betweens 40 and 60, and 18% are over age 60.

* ECONOMIC STATUS: Over half (60%) of all female characters on the new shows are middle class. More than a third (34%) are upper middle class or wealthy, while 6% are working class. None are poor. In

reality, 15% of all women live in poverty, 60% have personal incomes below $10,000, and 40% are in families with incomes below $20,000. Less than 0.2% of all women have incomes over $75,000.

* OCCUPATIONAL STATUS: Almost 80% of all adult female characters on the season's new shows are employed outside the home. Almost two-thirds (64%) work in professional occupations; 18% are in service jobs; 15% are in clerical occupations, and 3% work in the sales field. In reality, of the 55% of all women in the labor force, only 24% are in professional occupations. Eighteen percent are in service jobs, 29% in clerical occupations, and 13% in sales. Sixteen percent are in technical and blue collar jobs.

* MARITAL STATUS: Only 20% of all adult female characters on the new shows are married; 50% are single, 20% are divorced, and 10% are widowed. In reality, 61% of all women are married, 19% are single, 8% are divorced and 12% are widowed.

* RACE: More than three-quarters (77%) of female characters on new shows are white, while less than one quarter (20%) are black, 2% are Hispanic, and 2% Asian.

In reality, 84% of all females are white, 12% are black, 7% are Hispanic, and almost 2% are Asian.

* FAMILY: One-third of all families on the new shows are nuclear, with both father and mother present, while two-thirds contain only a single parent or guardian. About one-quarter of the children on the new shows live with both parents; of those children who live with a single parent, two-thirds live with their father or a male guardian, while only one-third live with their mother. In reality, three-quarters of all children live in nuclear families; 89% of children in single-parent homes live with their mother, while only 11% live with their father.

A WORLD WITHOUT WOMEN

An alarmingly high percentage of programs premiering this season are all-male series. They are joined by an even greater number of programs in which female characters are peripheral to the action.

Many of these shows feature male buddies in various unlikely combinations. An overweight middle-aged district attorney teams up with a dapper younger cop in "Jake and the Fat Man;" a financial whiz lives with his construction worker brother in "Everything's Relative;" and a sexy sophisticated detective works with a young redneck in "Private Eye." Almost half of the new season's male shows feature variations on the buddy theme. Unlike seasons past, almost none of this year's male characters is a loner.

The male characters' relationships, which for the most part are warm and affectionate, are with each other, with children, and with their mothers. Other adult women are strangely absent. Three of this season's new shows feature men eagerly raising and nurturing children on their own ("My Two Dads," "Full House," "Rags to Riches"). One of the men is a widower; one is a bachelor who has adopted a house full of girls of assorted races and ages; and two others share custody of a 12-year-old girl who might be either one's daughter. Rather than deny possible paternity, both men are thrilled at the prospect of being father to a pre-adolescent female.

Other leading male characters on the new men's shows this season are paternal and wise. Disappearing into oblivion on these shows are womanizing men -- characters like Mike Hammer from previous years -- who measure themselves by their sexual prowess. Accompanying this departure are male leads hired for their conventionally handsome features. On the male shows, only the leads of "Private Eye" and "Wiseguy" look like TV's typical leading men. Other characters, such as "J.J. Starbuck," "Buck James," "Ohara," and "Harry McGraw," depart from Hollywood's stereotype, filling the screen with a diversity of physical appearances not seen in recent seasons.

Also disappearing from this season's starting line-up are plots filled with anonymous sex, random bedroom violence, and female victims. TV's stock-in-trade, female prostitution and murder, is beginning to be replaced this fall with stories that substitute other themes, such as organized crime and investor greed, for sex. When women, sex and violence do intersect, it is often in plots in which women are just as likely to be the killers as those who are murdered.

In some aspects, these male shows present a new world not usually seen on television -- one in which men and women rarely interact. In that sense, these shows are not a throwback to "Miami Vice," "Spenser: For Hire," and the like, for the plots on those programs are filled with female sex and violence. Rather, this season seems to sidestep male/female relationships

by excluding continuing female characters from a significant number of shows -- shows in which they could logically appear. Or, at most, the roles allocated females are minimal, as in "Private Eye" and "Houston Knights."

Relegating women to the sidelines or banishing them from programs altogether solves a number of knotty problems. For one, it avoids the dilemma of how to portray sexual responsibility and safe sexual practices. Furthermore, it allows TV writers, most of whom are men, to create more male characters, which is what many know best. In addition, a line-up of male action shows is a strong attempt to lure disappearing men TV viewers back to the set with programs that presumably they will watch.

Such an effort gets mixed reviews, no matter what the motives. Although the networks should be criticized for writing women out of the plots of so many of their programs this fall, one of the unintended results has been less sexual violence on the screen. Now that sexual violence has been reduced, women need to be reintroduced into shows on a different basis, with a greater variety of roles to play.

GLIMPSES OF REALITY

Although this fall contains fewer shows with women than past seasons, many of the new shows that do portray women display welcome touches of reality.

Jobs and Wealth

For almost a decade, network television has been infatuated with wealthy women, most of whom were single and held glamorous professional jobs. From prime time soap operas to situation comedies, female doctors, lawyers and tycoons abounded.

This season, there are indications that television is beginning a move to reality, at least where female occupations are concerned. Office workers are becoming more visible in shows like "The Law and Harry McGraw," "Hooperman," "Private Eye," and the "Slap Maxwell Story." "Frank's Place" introduces viewers to black waitresses in a small restaurant in New Orleans. And "Hooperman" features a woman in a nontraditional job -- Susan, an apartment maintenance/repair person who's also a resident manager.

To be sure, this season's new shows do contain a large batch of female professionals: detectives, lawyers, reporters, doctors, judges, computer experts, and a mortician; but their lives are less elegant and glamorous than their counterparts in seasons past.

For instance, Claire McCarron, a lawyer/detective in "Legwork," often owes back bills when clients are late in paying

her, is not always asked out by the man of her choice, and feels conflicted when her best friend has a baby. Likewise, Catherine Chandler on "Beauty and the Beast" leaves a high-powered law firm to join the public prosecutor's office. The one female doctor of the season, Rebecca Meyer on "Buck James," works at a trauma center in Texas beset by bureaucracy, financial constraints, and fear of malpractice suits. And this season's female police officers are usually seen in the office dealing with paperwork rather than involved in exciting police work.

Other occupations represented on new shows this season include that of housekeeper on "I Married Dora," and resident manager of a college dormitory on "A Different World."

Although television's new shows still skew female characters into professional jobs rather than spreading them more evenly and realistically among other occupations, it is encouraging to see greater occupational diversity than in years past.

Accompanying this return to reality in jobs is the gradual decline of wealthy female characters on TV. For once, there are no new women millionaires on the screen. This decline, although steady, has been slow: 34% of female characters on new shows remain affluent, while 60% are solidly middle class. For the past several seasons, working-class characters have increased slightly. This year they stand at 6%. One of the most delightful working-class characters introduced this fall is Miss Marie on "Frank's Place," a black waitress in her 60s with bad

legs and a wise tongue who has worked in the same restaurant for decades. Also on the show is a feisty waitress, Anna May, who has worked in the restaurant since high school and is a sharp judge of people. The emergence of such women characters demonstrates the richness to be found when characters are created outside TV's narrow confines of class and occupation.

Family and Work

Reality crashes in on TV's characters this fall when they realize, male and female alike, the difficulty of having it all. For several seasons, network news documentaries and specials examining work/family conflicts have aired alongside prime time entertainment programs in which female characters breeze through the demands of hectic jobs, young children, husbands, and household chores. This season, though, TV characters are not having such an easy time. Reality, or a version of it, has set in.

On "Thirtysomething," a young mother who stays at home with her baby is jealous of her best friend, a high-powered manager who, in turn, longs for a husband and child of her own. Messy houses, sticky furniture, interrupted sleep, weight gain, lack of sex, and constant responsibility are new issues for TV's parents.

TV's new version of family reality might strike a chord with viewers who are affluent professionals, but for most viewers who are not, the economic struggles of raising a family make private school interviews for seven-month old babies and perfectionism in

selecting a babysitter, both recent stories on new shows, issues that belong in fantasyland.

In fact, this season's portrayal of children and their parents reveals a world in which men are the primary caretakers, raising over half of all children on the new shows and two-thirds the children who live in single-parent homes. In a radical departure from reality, single mothers are a minority, as are nuclear families with both mother and father present.

SEGREGATION PERSISTS

For the past several seasons, one or two of the new shows on the air have been programs with all black casts. For the most part, these shows have been successful and have remained on the air, where they are about the only place TV viewers can consistently find minority female faces. These black shows, such as "Amen," "227," and "The Cosby Show," have been joined this season by two new programs, "Frank's Place" and "A Different World." Both contain mainly minority characters, and both add to the total number of black female characters on television.

But, as in seasons past, both programs are virtually the only new shows to contain any minority female characters. Of all new black women characters this season, 80% are on only two shows ("Frank's Place" and "A Different World"). Additional black female characters include the teenager Marva on "Rages to Riches" and Teresa Storm, a black female attorney on "Ohara."

"I Married Dora," a situation comedy, does contain an Hispanic woman in the lead role. Dora Calderon is a Central American housekeeper living in the United States who marries her boss to avoid being deported back to her country where she might be killed.

Only one other new program, "Rags to Riches," contains a nonblack minority, Rose Foley, who is Asian.

The opportunities to integrate minority female characters into new shows are abundant. Many programs are located in

metropolitan areas with diverse ethnic populations. In addition, the shows contain a variety of workplace, residential and leisure settings where one would expect to find black, Hispanic, and Asian women.

A LOOK AT THE PAST

Although television programming may seem to vary only slightly from season to season, patterns of significant change can be traced, especially if one looks back in time. During the past two decades, for example, the number of women on the screen has increased, their characters have left home for the workplace, they have become less likely to be married and less likely to be white.

Visibility

The number of recurring female characters has grown since 1967 when a third of prime time entertainment programs contained no women at all. That proportion changed sharply during the next 10 years; by 1977 women appeared in over 80% of all series. Despite fewer female characters on the new shows this fall, women appear regularly in 90% of all shows on the complete 1987 schedule, a significant increase over 20 years ago.

Work

In 1967 more than a third of all female characters on TV were homemakers, compared to 19% in 1977 and 7% this fall. Homemaking on TV declined precipitously during the '70s as female characters went to work, many in nonprofessional occupations. Some had nontraditional jobs, while others worked in traditionally female occupations. "Alice" was a waitress; "Laverne and Shirley" were factory workers, and Janet and Chrissy on "Three's Company" were a sales clerk and a typist.

This season, almost 72% of all female characters are employed outside the home, with 76% of them in professional occupations.

Income

Accompanying TV's employment shift over the past two decades has been a shift in the economic status of female characters. In the '60s most women on TV were middle-class and dependent on someone else for their income. In the '70s more female characters were both wealthy and working class; and a greater percentage earned their own incomes. The 1987 season contains less economic and occupational diversity than 10 years ago, although female characters are beginning a return to middle-class life after several years of affluence and wealth.

Marriage

The number of single and divorced women on TV has grown over the past 20 years. Although television has always over-represented single women compared to reality, the gap has grown since the '60s, when 40% of all female characters were married and only 2% were divorced. In the 1970s married women declined to about a third of all female characters, while divorced and separated women rose to almost 8%. This season 25% of all characters are married, while 34% are divorced, widowed or separated; 41% are single.

Age

The majority of female characters on TV have always been

younger than women in the real world. In the 1960s less than 20% of all female characters were over age 40, while in the 1970s the percentage was just over 20%. In the complete 1987 season, 27% of women are over age 40.

Race

Perhaps most notable has been the increase of minority female characters during the past two decades. Twenty years ago, 97% of all recurring female characters on television series were white. About the only nonwhite female faces to be found were those of a black communications officer on "Star Trek," and a Puerto Rican nun on "The Flying Nun."

Ten years later, progress had been made, as the number of minority female characters on TV jumped to almost 10% in 1977. Like today, though, they existed primarily on black situation comedies, such as "Good Times," "The Jefferson's" and "What Happening." Rarely did black female characters have recurring roles in shows that were predominantly white; and rarely were TV's minority females other than black.

The visibility of black female characters has increased even more in the past 10 years; their percentage on all shows this season is 19%. However, they remain confined, for the most part, to black situation comedies. Remaining practically invisible on the screen are nonblack minority women.

CONCLUSION

Despite a measure of network progress in re-introducing more realistically drawn women this season, stark examples of stereotyping persist.

On the premiere episode of "My Two Dads," a situation comedy revolving around questionable paternity, a female lawyer in a judge's chamber rebuffs her client's advances with the following admonition: "Michael, I'm your attorney. You take a professional relationship to bed and you know what you become?" Before Michael can respond, the judge, a 50-year-old woman, answers, "I myself became the appellate judge of the Fifth District Court." When the young woman attorney expresses shock, the judge responds breezily, "It only took six minutes and now I'm a judge."

It is astonishing that such an offensive exchange was written and aired, without objection from producers, directors, actors or crew. With sexual harassment in the workplace at an all-time high, and a minuscule percentage of qualified women appointed as judges, such dialogue demonstrates that Hollywood can be remarkably unenlightened, insensitive and unaware of the real world.

Television producers, writers, directors and network executives are obligated to squash such offensiveness before it hits the air. There is no excuse for such an exchange.

However, if such outrageous dialogue should get past the

gatekeepers, it is up to viewers to respond forcibly. Working women, especially, who are concerned with their realistic and responsible portrayal in programs, must critically view and actively respond to what they see. Both individual letters and more organized campaigns are essential.

Letters represent just about the only feedback program creators receive concerning their characters and plots and, if written with thought, they can be powerful tools. Unless producers and network executives hear from viewers to the contrary, they will assume all is well. Whether the letter is a complaint about sexist dialogue, a criticism of stereotyped portrayals, or a suggestion for more realistically defined characters, viewers can have an impact on the programs they watch.

This season, in particular, is an important time for women to write: to applaud outstanding female images, to remind producers of the occupational realities of their characters, to suggest new women characters in shows where they are now lacking. It is true that the television industry is huge and powerful. But it is also true that it is pliable and subject to outside persuasion. If every working woman who watches television wrote regular letters to the networks and production studios concerning her image on TV, it is just possible that all viewers would begin to see on their screens more authentic, provocative and original women than have been on television in a long time.

METHODOLOGY

Since 1982 the Commission has been measuring television's progress, or lack each season, concerning the visibility and diversity of prime time TV's female characters. This report analyzes the portrayal of women on the fall's premiering series, as well as on programs which premiered as replacement shows in the spring of 1987.

The following information was coded and analyzed for every continuing female character on each program monitored: age, race, occupation, marital and socio-economic status, and number of children under 18 years of age. This information was obtained from viewing program tapes and from the production studios and television networks.

Excluded from the monitoring sample were all of daytime programming and the following prime time programs: variety, sports, news, movies, and specials.

NAMES AND ADDRESSES OF NEW FALL SHOWS

Program	Network	Production Studio
Beauty and the Beast	CBS 51 West 52nd St. New York, NY 10019 (212) 975-4321	Witt-Thomas-Harris Productions 846 N. Cahuenga Blvd. Hollywood, CA 90035 (213) 464-1333
Buck James	ABC 1330 Ave of the Americas New York, NY 10019 (212) 887-7777	Entertainment Partners, Tri-Star Productions 1875 Century Park East Los Angeles, CA 90067 (213) 558-5341
The Charmings	ABC	Embassy Television 956 Stewart St. Los Angeles, CA 90038 (213) 460-7200
A Different World	NBC 30 Rockefeller Plaza New York, NY 10112 (212) 664-4444	Carsey-Werner Productions 100 University City Plaza, Bungalow 415B Universal City, CA 91608 (213) 871-8169
Everything's Relative	CBS	Columbia Pictures Television Columbia Plaza Burbank, CA 91505 (818) 954-6000
Frank's Place	CBS	Viacom Productions 10 Universal Plaza Universal City, CA 91608 (818) 505-7500

Full House	ABC	Lorimar Telepictures Production 3970 Overland Ave. Culver City, CA 90230 (213) 558-6355
Hooperman	ABC	Adam Productions P.O. Box 900 Beverly Hills, CA 90213 (213) 277-2211
Houston Knights	CBS	Columbia Pictures Television (see "Everything's Relative")
I Married Dora	ABC	ABC Television Center 4151 Prospect Ave. Los Angeles, CA 90027 (213) 557-5883
Jake and the Fatman	CBS	Viacom Productions (see "Frank's Place")
JJ Starbuck	NBC	Stephen J. Cannell Productions 7083 Hollywood Blvd. Hollywood, CA 90028 (213) 465-5800
The Law and Harry McGraw	CBS	Universal Television 100 Universal City Plaza Universal City, CA 91608 (818) 777-1000
Legwork	CBS	Twentieth Century Fox 40 West 57th St. 8th Floor New York, NY (212) 977-5500
Max Headroom	ABC	Lorimar Telepictures Production (see "Full House")

My Two Dads	NBC	Tri-Star Television MTM-CBS Studio 4024 Radford, Bldg. 5 Studio City, CA 91604 (818) 760-8188
OHara	ABC	ABC Television Center (see "I Married Dora")
The Oldest Rookie	CBS	Touchstone Television c/o Walt Disney Productions 500 South Buena Vista Burbank, CA 91505 (818) 840-1000
Once A Hero	ABC	ABC Television Center (see "I Married Dora")
Private Eye	NBC	Universal Television (see "The Law and Harry McGraw")
Rags to Riches	NBC	New World Television 1440 Sepulveda Blvd. Los Angeles, CA 90025 (213) 558-6811
The "Slap" Maxwell Story	ABC	Slap Happy Productions 13451 Sherman Way North Hollywood, CA 91605 (818) 982-9921
Thirtysomething	ABC	Bedford Falls Production 4024 Radford Ave., Admin. Bldg, Ste. 310 Studio City, CA 91604 (818) 760-5104
Tour of Duty	CBS	New World Television (213) 444-8100 (see "Rags to Riches")
Wiseguy	CBS	Stephen J. Cannell Productions (see "J.J. Starbuck")

A Year in the Life	NBC	Universal Television (see "The Law and Harry McGraw")